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AUTHOR Chavkin, Nancy Feyl
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ABSTRACT

Following an overview of information on migrant families and children, this chapter describes strategies that administrators and teachers can use to promote family involvement in migrant students' education. Estimates of the numbers of migrant farmworkers and migrant children vary widely, and the diversity of migrant farmworkers' backgrounds makes it difficult to depict the typical migrant family. Nevertheless, most migrant families live lives characterized by low annual income, unhealthy working conditions, deficient living conditions, and the stresses and uncertainties of constant mobility. Migrant children are at high risk of dropping out of school due to poverty, mobility, health problems, and language differences. Family involvement in children's education is clearly beneficial, but educators must be prepared to meet initial reluctance or resistance on the part of migrant parents and to extend the notion of family involvement to include all in the community who affect students' lives. At the school district level, policies that support family and community involvement are essential. District support must occur during three critical stages: policy development, implementation as practical actions, and continuing policy maintenance. Important points to include in district policies are listed, as well as recommendations for implementation and maintenance. Partnership can lead to empowerment of parents, students, educators, and community members. Helpful strategies for teachers include open, continuous, two-way communication between schools and their partners; and training for teachers, parents, and community. Contains 39 references. (SV)

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CHAPTER 19

Involving Migrant Families in Their Children's Education:
Challenges and Opportunities for Schools

NANCY FEYL CHAVKIN
RICHTER INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL WORK
SOUTHWEST TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Mobility is an inherent part of migrant family life. Migrant families work and then move on to a new job. The cycle of "work, move, work, move" is continuous. Mobility affects everything a migrant family does. This chapter describes the lives of migrant families and how schools might better involve these families in their children's education.

Migrants are usually defined as farmworkers who follow the crops across the country or from one country to another, returning home for the winter harvest (Bartlett & Vargas, 1991). Since 1969 the Migrant Student Record Transfer System (MSRTS) has provided a definition and a tracking system for migrant students; however, this system tells us about only those migrant children who attend schools and are reported to the MSRTS (Cahape, 1993). Lack of a consistent federal definition and the fact that various federal agencies and offices undertake data collection mean that official studies can exhibit sharp differences about *who* migrant farmworkers are and about *how many* of them there are. Shotland (1989) reported that the estimate of the number of migrant farmworkers ranges

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from 317,000 to 1.5 million. The Migrant Health Program (1990) estimated that there were 1,661,875 migrant farmworkers in the United States. Martin (1994) reports that there are approximately 409,000 migrant children traveling with their families, mostly from one Mexican residence to one U.S. residence.

In addition to disagreements about the definition and number of migrant families, the diverse nature of migrant families' lifestyles makes it difficult to characterize the migrant family. Bartlett and Vargas (1991) describe the typical migrant farmworker as between 25 and 44, Latino, from Mexico or from Central America or Puerto Rico, with an average of 5.5 years of schooling, and not necessarily literate in his/her native language, which is usually Spanish.

We do know that most migrant families in the United States follow familiar geographic routes. Shotland (1989) discusses three distinct streams: the East Coast Stream, the Mid-continent Stream, and the West Coast Stream.

The East Coast Stream consists of American Blacks, Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals, Anglos, Jamaican and Haitian Blacks, and Puerto Ricans. This route includes the states along the eastern seaboard and southern United States. The Mid-continent Stream primarily consists of Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals, with small numbers of American Indians; the route begins in south Texas and moves north through the midwestern and western states. The Western Stream starts in California and moves up through Oregon and Washington, and it also is composed of a majority of Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals, although recently it has also included Southeast Asians.

Family income studies (Shotland, 1989) show that the average annual income for 1986 was less than $6,500. Jobs are usually seasonal and inconsistent, and workers are not generally covered by employee benefit programs. In addition, because of residency problems, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with locally available resources, most migrant families receive few social, economic, or health services.

The living and working conditions of migrant families are a serious national health problem. Shotland (1989) reports that risks include injury from farm machinery and equipment, poor sanitation, chronic and acute exposure to toxic chemicals, constant physical demands, and exposure to bad weather. Many families lack toilets and clean drinking water. Living quarters are usually dilapidated farmhouses, field barracks, small shacks, and even improvised shelters.

Robert Coles' (1971) classic study of migrant families is still a good representation of what life is like for a migrant family. He reports that the family is always stooping and picking, always doing what has to be done.

Lives are impoverished, hungry, and uncertain; there is always the next place to go. Children learn early that each new day brings backbreaking toil for their parents and that after one field is picked, it means a trip to another one, which may be in a new county or a new state. The video documentary *New Harvest, Old Shame* (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1990) with its rich portrayal of the daily lives of migrant families, shows that life had not changed much for migrant families in 20 years.

Prewitt-Diaz, Trotter, and Rivera (1990) conducted an ethnographic study of migrants in 10 states. Their report was the result of more than 3,000 hours of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and life histories. They recorded two patterns of migration—intrastate and interstate. The major reason for migration was always economic. Deciding where to move and when was based on knowledge about the length of seasons, timing of crops, changing agricultural conditions, rates of pay, and housing considerations. Migrants talked of isolation and constant adjustment to new surroundings. As one interviewee said, "It's hard to have to always leave and say goodbye all the time" (p. 48).

Stresses on migrant families are enormous. Child abuse reports reveal a dark side of migrant family life—child maltreatment. The level of maltreatment among migrant families is much higher than for the general population (Lawless, 1986). Findings indicate that there is a differential risk of maltreatment depending on migrant status, family structure, and age. Intrastate migrant families have a higher incidence of reported maltreatment than interstate migrant families. Children from single parent families and younger children have a higher probability of being maltreated. Poverty and extraordinary challenge, combined with few resources to meet the challenges, are the likely causes.

Although the findings for single parent families and younger children are consistent with research conducted with non-migrant families, researchers disagree about the reasons for the different rates of maltreatment among interstate migrants and intrastate migrants. Some researchers hypothesize that there is a lower incidence of reported maltreatment among interstate migrants than intrastate migrants, because interstate migrant families travel with their support systems and have learned to cope with stress and negative living conditions. Others suggest that the lower rates of maltreatment are attributable to the effects of constant moves on the detection and reporting process.

The Interstate Migrant Education Council's report (IMEC, 1987) details the special problems facing migrant students, who are at great risk for dropping out of school. In addition to the problems associated with migrant students' mobility, these students are also handicapped by their limited English fluency, their poverty, their lack of academic skills, and their need to work or take care of younger children to support the family.

Romo (1993) reports that Mexican immigrant students whose families migrate as seasonal agricultural workers have special needs that vary considerably across the population. Some students have never enrolled in school in Mexico; others have attended a few years of *Primaria* (approximately grades 1-6 in the United States). A few have been fortunate enough to attend *Secundaria* (approximately 7th-9th grade in the United States) and have a strong educational background. The common characteristics of these migrant students are the need to learn English and a wide variation in early educational background.

Too frequently, educators associate the lack of English proficiency with a lack of intellectual ability, when, in fact, mobility rather than lack of ability has kept students from learning. Romo (1993) reports that schools in the United States have responded to the complicated issues of language, migration, and immigration by offering intensive English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, bilingual programs, and newcomers' schools. Each program has its own advantages and disadvantages, and all of the programs are hampered by the students' continued mobility.

Migrant students have the lowest graduation rate of any group in the public schools and their rate of completion for postsecondary education is even lower. Five times as many migrant students are enrolled in the second grade as in the 12th grade, and migrant educators place the dropout rate for migrant students anywhere from 50 to 90 percent (IMEC, 1987).

Baca and Harris (1988) report that migrant students are more likely to be affected by multiple health problems and disabilities. They report a higher incidence of birth injuries, mental retardation, accidents, poor pre- and postnatal care, and anemia among migrant students than the general population. The Center for Educational Planning (1989) also points out that discrimination compounds the challenges of poverty, mobility, health problems, and language difference.

Family Involvement in Migrant Students' Education

Even after differences in student ability and socioeconomic status are taken into account, the evidence that family involvement in education increases student achievement is clear (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Kagan, 1984; Walberg, 1984). In a study of high-achieving and low-achieving migrant students, parents of high achievers could list the ways the school was supportive of their child's education (Center for Educational Planning, 1989), whereas parents of low achievers had difficulty naming things that the school was doing to help their child. (It is, of course, not difficult to believe that schools have trouble helping low-achieving migrant students; the challenges are great.) Interestingly, even though no migrant parents in

this study helped their children with their homework, parents of high achievers reported spending "quality time" with, and providing educational experiences for, their children, whereas no parents of low achievers reported these two activities.

Researchers such as Olsen and Dowell (1989) and Lucas, Henze, and Donato (1990) describe programs that are meeting the needs of immigrant and migrant students. The programs resemble good schools anywhere. They exhibit sound educational philosophy such as high academic expectations for all students, family involvement, and strong instructional leadership. The effective programs, as might be expected, also valued students' home language and culture, made migrant students' education a priority, worked with families in their own language and in the community, and included strong staff development programs. Not only were students' circumstances understood, but education was not conceived apart from the whole of students' lives.

Herrington (1987) discusses the importance of teachers' willingness to contact and work with parents. He notes that many migrant families have strengths of resiliency, resourcefulness, and responsiveness that teachers can recognize, value, and use. Schools must find ways to bring such strengths to bear on behalf of migrant students.

Family involvement in education is a new concept for many migrant families, and educators should *not* be surprised to find that initial efforts to involve migrant parents meet with resistance. Many migrant families believe it is the school's responsibility to educate their children; for these families, parent participation in education is a new cultural concept (Simich-Dudgeon, 1986a). Parents want the best for their children, but these parents may believe that their involvement would be counter-productive or that the schools might construe involvement as interference. In the Prewitt-Diaz, Trotter, and Rivera study (1990), the students who were successful in school often reported it was someone other than their parents who had been their inspiration to complete school. Teachers should remember that, for migrant parents, a day's wage can be important to family cohesion and even survival. When this is the case, it makes sense that parents would prefer to see their children in the fields rather than in the schools.

Involving migrant families in the education of their children is both a challenge and an opportunity. Educators need to extend the word family from the traditional definition of biological parents to all those in the community who have a significant effect on students' lives. This broader definition is a definition that creates new possibilities for linking the home and school communities. Carter (1993) calls this a family-focused approach that stems from a logical sequence of beliefs. "If better child outcomes are the shared goal of the community and its institutions, then we

must use all the resources necesary to achieve those outcomes to their fullest potential" (p. 7). Carter suggests that both families and communities be full partners in the educational process. Accepting the premise is easy, but as Carter suggests, "getting from here to there is the hard part" (p. 7).

Strategies for School Districts

Many studies show what schools can do to promote family involvement. The studies hold true for migrant families, and they can serve as benchmarks for whether schools are doing what they say they want to be doing.

Williams and Chavkin (1990) used a key informant approach (interviewing educators with expertise in family involvement programming) to identify and describe the essential features of promising family and community involvement programs in school districts in five southwestern states. Two key features of effective programs stood out: written policies and administrative support for family involvement. Everything else concerned ways school districts facilitated actual work with families, including training for staff and families; a partnership approach in every aspect of programming; two-way communication; networking within and outside the district; and evaluation. In each case, the school board set the official district policy on family and community involvement and then provided administrative support to implement the established policies. Individual schools within the district developed their own strategies for undertaking actual work with families, with support from the central office as necessary.

The earlier work of Davies (1987) is in agreement with the need for a school district policy about family involvement. Because school districts have unique features that make them resist change, policies about family and community involvement are absolutely necessary. Davies' research found that the organizational goals of schools are diffuse and that responsibility for achieving goals is fragmented among administrators, counselors, teachers, families, and students. In addition, the informal norms of schools are powerful, and the formal structure is complicated, sometimes so complicated that it frustrates goal achievement. These organizational realities make family involvement difficult to introduce and maintain without a formal, written policy. A mandate for family involvement is essential, according to Davies.

Because the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE) is dedicated to the development of family/school partnerships (NCPIE, 1992), its work is particularly relevant to migrant students and families. The NCPIE organizations used their broad and diverse experiences in working with teachers, administrators, families, and community leaders to develop general policy suggestions for school districts:

- opportunities for all families to become informed about how the family involvement program will be designed and carried out;
- participation of families who lack literacy skills or who do not speak English;
- regular information for families about their child's participation and progress in specific educational programs and the objectives of those programs;
- opportunities for families to assist in the instructional process at school and at home;
- professional development for teachers and staff to enhance their effectiveness with families;
- linkages with social service agencies and community groups to address key family and community issues;
- involvement of families of children at all ages and grade levels;
- recognition of diverse family structures, circumstances and responsibilities, including differences that might impede family participation. The person(s) responsible for a child may not be the child's biological parent(s), and policies and programs should include participation by all persons interested in the child's educational progress.

As many migrant educators know firsthand, policies alone are not enough. Chavkin (1995) states that policies provide only the framework; policies need to be supported by mechanisms for monitoring, enforcing, and providing technical assistance. District support for migrant family and community involvement must occur during three critical stages: (1) development, (2) implementation, and (3) maintenance. District support helps a policy come into formal existence (development), helps translate it into practical actions (implementation), and helps maintain the policy (maintenance). Support is likely, moreover, to emerge from informal sources; policy development helps secure the commitment of the formal organization.

Based on information from actual programs, NCPIE (1992) and the National School Boards Association (Amundson, 1988) both recommend several kinds of support for policies to involve families in school activities during the development phase. These begin with assessing family needs and interests about ways of working with schools and setting clear and measurable goals, with family and community input. The understanding of what a true partnership means is critical during this first stage. School districts need to see migrant families and community members as equal partners and seek their input in developing a vision of their district's ideal family involvement program. Districts need to exert leadership and seek the involvement of migrant families within a broad community effort.

Once a policy is adopted, school districts need to successfully implement it with the help of a strong support system. Some suggestions that

have worked for districts with migrant students and families include the following:

- Hire and train a parent liaison to contact migrant families directly and to coordinate parent activities. The liaison should be bilingual, if interacting with another language group, and sensitive to the needs of migrant families and the community, especially those of the non-English-speaking community.
- Develop public relations to inform families, businesses, and the community about parent involvement policies and programs through newsletters, slide shows, videotapes, announcements and stories in local newspapers, and such.
- Recognize the importance of a community's historic, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural resources in generating interest in parent participation. Even when there are problems, such as farmworker health or working condition issues, a family involvement program can serve as a forum for discussion and a conduit for change.
- Use creative forms of communication between educators and families. This may include parent/teacher conferences at community centers, homes, or neutral meeting places which yield individual parent/child and teacher/child plans.
- Mobilize families as volunteers in the school to help teachers with listening to oral reading, assisting in the lunchroom, and helping with office functions. Families might act as invited speakers when they are not working in the fields because of weather conditions or equipment repairs.
- Train educators to use techniques for surmounting barriers between migrant families and schools.

The maintenance stage follows the coming together of the partnership and the establishment of an official group; the maintenance stage focuses on working together with all partners. The work is not done after policies are developed and implemented. In fact, most partnerships report that very difficult tasks define the maintenance stage. The maintenance stage is when budgets, personalities, and time become abiding issues.

After implementing policies about migrant family and community involvement, the maintenance stage must enhance initial successes. NCPIE makes the following three recommendations:

1. Integrate information and assistance with other aspects of the total learning environment. Migrant families should have access to information about such services as health care and nutrition programs provided by schools or community agencies.
2. Schedule programs and activities flexibly to reach diverse family groups.
3. Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of migrant family involvement programs and activities on a regular basis.

Strategies for Teachers

Partnership can lead to empowerment of parents, students, educators, and community members. Helpful strategies for teachers include (1) open, continuous, two-way communication; and (2) training for teachers, parents, and community.

Communication

Partnerships must foster open, continuous, two-way communication between the schools and their partners. Lack of communication is one of the main obstacles to parent and community involvement. The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher (Harris, Kagay, & Ross, 1987), which surveyed thousands of teachers and parents of public-school children, found that parents in inner-city districts were less satisfied than suburban parents with the frequency of their contacts with teachers. In addition, parents with less than a high school education were twice as likely to feel awkward about approaching school personnel as parents with a college education. Sometimes parents were intimidated by their communication with faculty and staff, and often they were dismayed by the institutional structure of the schools, particularly if they had previously had negative contacts with the school.

In a survey by Chavkin and Williams (1993), the number one suggestion that parents had for improving involvement was "to give parents more information about children's success in school" (p. 79). This was followed by the suggestions of "helping students understand that having their parents involved was important"; "making parents feel more welcome in the school"; "having more activities that include children, parents, and teachers"; and "asking parents in what way they would like to be involved" (p. 79). All of these suggestions concern communication.

Nicolau and Ramos (1990) report on recent research by the Hispanic Policy Development Project. Hispanic parents had very high regard and respect for school authority and often did not see how they could possibly provide input to teachers. Parents tended not to respond to printed material sent home with their children. Parents were most often involved in schools when face-to-face contact established personal relationships with neighbors or community workers.

Most schools have established methods of communicating with parents; however, much of this communication is one-way (school to parents). The need for more two-way communication is great in most schools. School can be a formidable place for parents; educators must take the time to listen to parents. Educators have a lot to learn about what it feels like to be a parent or community member walking into a school—especially an *unfamiliar* school.

Bermúdez (1994) reports that teachers often overlook what they can learn from migrant families. These families are rich sources of information useful in both the classroom and the community. These parents have worked with their children in the fields; they know their learning styles, their strengths, and their weaknesses.

Partnerships require that all participants share responsibility for educational outcomes. Active, integrated roles reflect this shared responsibility. Delgado-Gaitán (1991) insists that effective programs validate the cultural and social experiences of families. Schools should not be telling parents what schools need; instead, schools should be asking parents for ideas to help their children and to make schools more effective. Because parents and community members are such important participants in the education of children and youth, the relationship among parents, community members, and schools must become a true partnership in which all groups participate equally.

There is a big difference between the rhetoric of partnership and the action of partnership. Educators must truly believe and act on the belief that parents are their children's first teacher and the teacher by far most likely to accompany children into adulthood. As Sosa (1993) advocates, educators must discard the deficit model of working with families and, instead, operate on an enrichment model where parents are truly understood and believed to want the best for their children. Not only must educators tell *parents* that their influence is as least as important as that of the school, educators must tell *students* how important their homes and communities are. A partnership allows educators to tap [illegible]-often neglected source of strength and meaning that is the natural ally of instruction.

For parents and community members to become successfully involved in a home-school partnership, they and school representatives must agree to a clearly defined set of goals and objectives accompanied by explicit roles and responsibilities related to those goals and objectives. Each school must meet with parent, community, and teacher representatives to define local goals for parent and community involvement and begin a long-term plan. Each school's current involvement practices need to be assessed so that parents, community members, and educators understand where they are and how to reach their goals. Programs require specific development and leadership. Even schools that seem similar can easily differ in their parent involvement efforts. It is critical to tailor the goals and objectives of parent and community involvement programs to the experiences and practices of each school within a community.

If parents and community members can begin to communicate effectively with schools, fears will gradually subside and previously isolated groups will learn to trust each other. Schools must communicate frequently

and effectively with parents and community members, and communication should use every form available, with particular emphasis on cultivating face-to-face personal relationships.

Training

Teachers and administrators lack training about the best ways to involve low-income and minority parents and community members effectively. Colleges of education are just now beginning to change their curriculums to emphasize the role of the family in children's education. Chavkin and Williams (1988) found that less than 5 percent of the teachers in their survey reported having a formal course in working with parents and communities. Lack of training is compounded by a scarcity of information about comprehensive "how-to-do" parent and community involvement. Even teachers who do want to learn about parent involvement have to search for materials.

The Trinity/Arlington Project (Simich-Dudgeon, 1986b) was developed for limited-English-proficient students and consisted of teacher training, parent training, and the pilot testing of a vocational-oriented bilingual curriculum. Students reported that they acquired a better understanding of the American school system and that they learned about career planning. Parents' contacts with the schools increased, and parents were observed to have increased concern for their children's education and for their children's acquisition of basic skills necessary for functioning in this country. In addition, strong relationships were found between project activities and gains in students' English proficiency and academic self-concept.

The University of Houston-Clear Lake Model (Bermúdez, 1994) is a parent-education model for preservice and practicing teachers. Students learn about barriers to parent involvement and practice minimizing those barriers. The analysis of students' field notes revealed that 80 percent had a positive change of attitude toward minority parents after participating in the program. Another 10 percent stated that they already had positive attitudes before the program, and the remaining 10 percent showed no change of attitude. Similarly, the results from parents indicated they possessed increased awareness of the school's instructional program, participated more often in their child's school activities, and had a more favorable attitude toward the school.

Educator training can help establish parent and community involvement as a responsibility and a legitimate function of the school. McLaughlin and Shields (1987) aptly point out that it takes a combination of pressure and support to generate parent involvement. Mandates alone have not been able to generate sufficient parent involvement; norm-based pressures such as information about the success of parent-involvement efforts, incentives, and professional expectations are required.

Parents and community members also need support and training to assume partnership roles with schools. Traditionally parents and community members have served primarily in the roles of audience and supporter, with a few parents assuming the role of home tutor. Parents and community members have expressed interest in moving beyond these traditional roles. They want to be involved in partnership approaches to education, but training is fundamental in order for partnerships to succeed.

Bermúdez (1994) suggests that many Hispanic parents want to learn how to help their children. She suggests that some families can monitor children's progress through simple daily or weekly checklists. Other families may benefit from training in questioning techniques, sharing oral histories, listening to children, checking out books and materials from the school or the library, toymaking, support services, or field trips. School-based training programs are not the only kind of parent programs; programs can be center-based or home-based. Delgado-Gaitán (1991) describes an empowerment program in Carpineria, California, where a group of low-income parents first learned how schools operate and then formed a group to help advocate for parents who were more fearful or less assertive.

Partnerships will be widely effective only if parent and community partners get training for their roles. Parents and community members need specific information and training in order to assume partnership roles. They want to know what their roles are and how to perform them effectively. Training for parents should complement that provided school staff, and teachers should become familiar with the activities and programs developed by others (Bermúdez, 1994; Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1986; Moles & D'Angelo, 1993; Nicolau & Ramos, 1990; Montecel, Gallagher, Montemayor, Villarreal, Adam-Reyna, & Supik, 1993).

Ongoing evaluation should also be part of the training for partnerships with migrant families. Partnerships need to be assessed at frequent checkpoints to see not only if their goals and objectives are being met but also if the goals and objectives are still appropriate (Melaville & Blank, 1993). Partnerships must recognize the complexity that life brings to migrant students and their families. Programs need to be flexible and must adjust to ensuing changes for the student, the family, the school, and the community. Often partnerships start with one specific goal and then need to revise their plans as they find out more about the problem. For example, academic concerns may lead to goals that concern health, financial problems, or child care.

Conclusion

Clearly, migrant students are vulnerable to missing and eventually dropping out of school. With our nation's current economic picture, migrant family lives are not going to change substantially; migrant families will continue to move in search of subsistence and economic self-improvement. What schools and teachers can do to meet this challenge, however, could have a profound effect on migrant students' education and subsequent life chances. Opportunities for action include adopting and supporting family involvement policies; developing and nurturing partnerships; communicating two ways and not just one way with families and communities; and participating in ongoing training about family involvement. Understanding the culture and values of migrant families and reconceptualizing how we all define and work with families will help educators facilitate migrant students' learning.

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